

**The Nature and Dignity of Woman  
St. Thérèse of Lisieux Lecture  
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*In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit  
Mary, Seat of Wisdom, Pray for us.*

**I. Introduction: Vigil of the Twentieth Anniversary of *Mulieris Dignitatem***

I would like to thank Bishop Morlino for this kind invitation to offer the St. Thérèse of Lisieux Lecture here in Madison. As some of you may know, several of your seminarians are students in my philosophy classes at St. John Vianney Theological Seminary in Denver, and Bishop Morlino himself attended and contributed to one of my classes a few years ago. Our mutual interest in the history of the philosophy of the person in Catholic thought, and especially of the concept of woman in relation to man, brings us together once again. I look forward to pondering together with you the teachings of the Church on the nature and dignity of woman.

In case you are not aware, next August 15<sup>th</sup> is the twentieth anniversary of the promulgation by Pope John Paul II, of the Apostolic Letter, *Mulieris Dignitatem* (On the Dignity and Vocation of Women). Recently there has been a flurry of activity around celebrating this event. For example, the Council for the Laity is holding a Congress in Rome, February 7-9, 2008 with representatives from all five continents to assess the significance of this document twenty years after its promulgation. Each continent is encouraged to hold follow-up conferences; and one of ours will be held in Washington DC, October 3-4, 2008. In thinking about this remarkable upcoming international attention to woman's identity in the Church and in the world, I was struck by the fact that Bishop Morlino chose our very topic on the nature and dignity of woman.

It seems to me that we have been given an opportunity to prepare a kind of spiritual and intellectual vigil for the celebrations of next year.

Accordingly, I will take this occasion to look back at the principles that Pope John Paul II articulated in his apostolic letter. Where possible I will try to describe when they were innovative principles with respect to previous teaching about women. Then, in some cases, I will evaluate the principles in the light of the present context of the new evangelization. Finally, I will suggest some possible ways we might consider acting on these principles with respect to future challenges. My reflections will proceed chronologically through the document *Mulieris Dignitatem* in order to provide a study guide, in case you should decided to read it. This pattern follows the ENDOW model of study guides, a Catholic educational organization for “women in the pew” founded in Denver, and rapidly spreading to several states and countries. I will return to this model of ENDOW at the end of the lecture.

## **II. The truth about the human being (#1-2).**

In this meditation on the dignity and vocation of women, John Paul II asks us to return to the Second Vatican II *Constitution on the Church in the Modern World (Gaudium et spes)* promulgated in 1965.<sup>1</sup> Having been an integral part of writing this document, Karol Cardinal Wojtyla, calls us back to the famous passage in GS 22 which I will paraphrase as “Jesus Christ fully reveals us to ourselves, (or me to myself) and makes our (my) supreme calling clear.”<sup>2</sup> How

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<sup>1</sup> See *Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents*, vol 1, ed. Austin Flannery, O.P. (New York: Costello Publishing Company, 1998), 903-1001a. The passage in this text is: “Christ the Lord, Christ the new Adam, in the very revelation of the mystery of the Father and of his love, fully reveals man to himself and brings to light his most high calling.”, #22, p. 922.

<sup>2</sup> John Paul II, *On the Dignity and Vocation of Women (Mulieris Dignitatem)* (Boston: St. Paul Books and Media, 1988), #2.

does Jesus do this? Answers to this question are interwoven throughout the magnificent text of John Paul II. So I ask you to hold on to the tension of this question throughout our time together this evening. How does Jesus Christ reveal me to myself, as this particular woman or as this particular man, at this particular time and place in my life?

Contrast this call to discover the greatness of the human being in both *Gaudium et spes* and *Mulieris Dignitatem* with the following observation about humanity from Cardinal Ratzinger's (Pope Benedict) text: *The Yes of Jesus Christ: Spiritual Exercises in Faith, Hope and Love*:

Today there is a remarkable hatred among people for their own real greatness. Man sees himself as the enemy of life, of the balance of creation, as the great disturber of the peace of nature (which would be better off if he did not exist), as the creature that went wrong. His salvation and the salvation of the world would on this view consist of his disappearing, of his life and soul being taken back from him, of what is specifically human vanishing so that nature could return to its unconscious perfection in its own rhythm and with its own wisdom of dying and coming into being.<sup>3</sup>

The reality of the call to overcome this “remarkable hatred among people for their own greatness” brings a kind of new urgency to our reflections on this vigil of the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Apostolic Letter on the Dignity and Vocation of women. It is not simply an intellectual exercise, but it is also a way of participating in the new evangelization of the Church and the world. The truth about the human being, about woman and about man, is that each of us has been created with the possibility of eternal life in communion with God and the saints. This is the true greatness of our unique personal being.

In section #1 of the document, John Paul II says: “It is a question of understanding the reason for and the consequences of the Creator’s decision that the human being should always

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<sup>3</sup> Pope Benedict XVI [prior to his pontificate], *The Yes of Jesus Christ: Spiritual Exercises in Faith, Hope, and Love*, trans. Robert Nowell (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 1991), 74.

and only exist as a woman or a man. It is only by beginning from these bases, which make it possible to understand the greatness of the dignity and vocation of women, that one is able to speak of their active presence in the Church and in society.”

In section #2, the two theological roots of the great dignity of a woman and a man are identified: first, “every man and woman...[ has] a fundamental inheritance... [namely being] created in the image of God:... male and female he created them.” Second, Jesus Christ came to earth and assumed our human nature; and in our Baptism adopted us into his relation with the Father, sharing His inheritance of eternal life with the Divine Communion of Persons. Our great dignity is thus rooted theologically in our Creation in the image and likeness of God and our Redemption through the Son, the Eternal Word made flesh.

In *Fides et ratio*, the 1998 Encyclical Letter on the *Relationship between Faith and Reason*, Pope John Paul II said that “Faith and reason are like two wings on which the human spirit rises to the contemplation of truth...”<sup>4</sup> This leads us to consider how the great dignity of the human being can be defended by reason as well as by faith. In an early essay (1964) Karol Wojtyla also offered evidence for the dignity of the human person, based on observation and human reason:

The human being holds a position superior to the whole of nature and stands above everything else in the visible world. This conviction is rooted in experience.... Our distinctiveness and superiority as human beings in relation to other creatures is constantly verified by each one of us, regardless of how inferior we might feel because of our physical or spiritual deficiencies. In the latter case, the superiority and natural dignity of the person is confirmed as though by contrast. It is also verified by the whole of humanity in its ongoing experience: in the experience of history, culture, technology, creativity, and production. The effects of human activity in various communities testify to this dignity.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> John Paul II, *Fides et ratio* (Boston: Pauline Books and Media, 1998), Salutation.

<sup>5</sup> Karol Wojtyla, “The Dignity of the Human Person,” in *Person and Community: Selected Essays*, trans. Theresa Sandok, OSM (New York: Peter Lang, 1993), 178.

Karol Wojtyla understands this philosophical source of human dignity as intimately connected with the truth about the human person. In his own words:

Human beings do not live for the sake of technology, civilization or even culture; they live by means of these things, always persevering their own purpose. This purpose is intimately connected with truth, because the human being is a rational being, and also with the good, because the good is the proper object of free will.<sup>6</sup>

To summarize John Paul II's approach to the nature and dignity of woman: 1) Our nature is a **human** nature; we know this 'by faith in revelation from above' and 'by reasoning about our observations from below'. 2) From above, we believe that our dignity flows from its supernatural origins, being created in the image and likeness of God, each one of us uniquely with the spiritual faculties of an intellect capable of knowing the truth and a will capable of freely choosing to act on the basis of this truth about ourselves. 3) From above, we also believe that our dignity is further elevated by the fact that Jesus Christ, Our Lord and Savior, assumed our *human* nature, not an angelic nature and not some other kind of nature, but our specific human nature. 4) From below, we observe the difference between our human nature and the nature of other living things by looking around, and seeing that we are the only kind of living thing that keeps its own written history, creatively uses advanced technology for its own purposes, and develops its own culture collectively and individually to the highest degree. This is true of human beings in general. Now we will return to our study of *Mulieris Dignitatem*, and ask how these characteristics of the dignity of the human person particularly relate to woman's identity.

### **III. Mary, the Mother of God, our pilgrim guide for dialogue (#3-5).**

In sections 3-5 of *Mulieris Dignitatem* Pope John Paul II unfolded a new depth of understanding of Mary's place in the Church and world, definitively revealed through, what he

called, “The whole Annunciation dialogue”; in his words: “This event is clearly interpersonal in character: it is a dialogue”(#5). Mary engaged her intellect first in the dialogue when she asked the angel Gabriel, “How can this be?; and then after hearing the response that she will be overshadowed by the Holy Spirit, she freely chose with her will to accept this invitation for her sublime vocation. John Paul II elaborates that “through her response of faith Mary exercises her free will and thus fully shares with her personal and feminine “I” in the event of the Incarnation.... All of God’s actions in human history at all times respects the free will of the human “I.”(#4) Mary’s intellect and will are those very gifts she inherited by being created in the image of God.

John Paul II describes the personal dimension of the Annunciation event this way: “At the moment of the Annunciation, by responding with her ‘fiat,’ Mary conceived a man who was the Son of God, of one substance with the Father. Therefore, she is truly the Mother of God, because motherhood concerns the whole person, not just the body, nor even just human ‘nature’” (#4). From the perspective of the nature and dignity of woman, he states that the model of Mary at the Annunciation “also signifies the fullness of the perfection of ‘what is characteristic of woman, of ‘what is feminine.’ Here we find ourselves, in a sense, at the culminating point, the archetype, of the personal dignity of women.”

The special attention to dialogue was developed further by Pope John Paul II in two documents: *Ut unum sint* (1995) and *Vita consecrata* (1996). In *Ut unum sint*, he said that:

The capacity for ‘dialogue’ is rooted in the nature of the person and his dignity.... Dialogue is an indispensable step along the path *towards human self-realization, the self-realization both of each individual and of every human community*. Although the concept of ‘dialogue’ might appear to give priority to the cognitive dimension (*dia-logos*), all

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<sup>6</sup> Wojtyla, “The Dignity of the Human Person,” 179.

dialogue implies a global, existential dimension. It involves the human subject in his or her entirety....”<sup>7</sup>

He concludes that dialogue is not simply an exchange of ideas. In some way it is always an “exchange of gifts.” (#28).

Then, in *Vita Consecrata*, John Paul II connects this mission for dialogue to the vocation to consecrated life for the good of the Church:

Everything must be done in communion and dialogue with all other sectors of the Church.... The experience of recent years widely confirms that **‘dialogue is the new name of charity,’** especially charity within the Church. Dialogue helps us to see the true implications of problems and allows them to be addressed with greater hope of success. The consecrated life **by the very fact that it promotes the value of fraternal life provides a privileged experience of dialogue.** It can therefore contribute to creating a climate of mutual acceptance in which the Church’s various components, feeling that they are valued for what they are, come together in ecclesial communion in a more convinced manner, ready to undertake the great universal mission.<sup>8</sup>

The notion of dialogue as the new name for charity, opens up a rich dynamic for those who are called to follow the Marian model of vocation. In *Mulieris Dignitatem* #5, we are told that “The dignity of **every human being** and the vocation corresponding to that dignity find their definitive measure in *union with God*. Mary ... is the most complete expression of this dignity and vocation.”

Thus, this particular woman Mary, serves as the guide for the vocation of every woman and every man. This is why John Paul II, just one year before *Mulieris Dignitatem*, at the beginning of Section III of his 1987 Encyclical *Redemptoris Mater* (*Mother of the Redeemer*),

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<sup>7</sup> John Paul II, *Ut unum sint: On Commitment to Ecumenism* (May 25, 1995), #28. He refers back to Pope Paul VI’s Encyclical *Ecclesiam Suam, On the Church*, Chapter III (August 6, 1964) where the theme of dialogue was first addressed in detail.

<sup>8</sup> John Paul II, *Vita Consecrata*, Post Synodal Apostolic Exhortation on *The Consecrated Life and Its Mission in the Church and In the World* (March 25, 1996). Again he refers back to Paul VI, *Ecclesiam Suam* for the reference to dialogue as the name for charity, :”To this internal drive of charity which seeks expression in the external gift of charity, We will apply the word ‘dialogue.’”, #64.

described Mary as the Pilgrim Guide at the center of the Pilgrim Church.<sup>9</sup> Because Mary shared in the dignity and call of our human nature, and lived the pilgrimage of her vocation before us, she can guide each of us on our pilgrimage individually and communally, as she guided her friends in the early Church after the death and Resurrection of her Son.

#### **IV. *Communio* in the Holy Trinity analogous for *communio* of women and men (#6-8).**

At this point in *Mulieris Dignitatem*, Pope John Paul II turns our attention towards truths about woman in relation to man and in relation to God. First, he describes the man-woman relation; and second, he elaborates the essential characteristics of the analogy between, on the one hand, the Divine relations among the Persons of the Holy Trinity, and on the other hand, the human personal relations between women and men. In both of these areas Pope John Paul introduces some important corrections of previously false understandings. Let us consider each area in turn.

While many have argued in the past that *Genesis* suggests a subordination or inequality of woman in relation to man, John Paul II emphasizes the fundamental equality and dignity of woman and man. Having already prepared the ground-work for this claim in his Wednesday audiences of 1979-81,<sup>10</sup> in section #6 of *Mulieris Dignitatem*, he states unequivocally and with emphasis in italics: “[B]oth man and woman are human beings to an equal degree, both are

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<sup>9</sup> John Paul II, Encyclical Letter *Redemptoris Mater* (*Mother of the Redeemer*) (March 25, 1987). ENDOW also has a study guide for those interested in learning about this document.

<sup>10</sup> For these detailed studies, see John Paul II, *Original Unity of Man and Woman: Catechesis on the Book of Genesis* (Boston: Daughters of St. Paul, 1981); John Paul II, *The Theology of the Body: Human Love in the Divine Plan* (Boston: Pauline Books and Media, 1997); and Mary Shivanandan, *Crossing the Threshold of Love: Contemporary Marriage in the Light of John Paul II's Anthropology* (Edinburgh: T and T Clark, 1999).



created in *God's image*;" and "*Man is a person, man and woman equally so*, since both were created in the image and likeness of God." Then to be sure that his reader gets the point, he adds: "The biblical text provides sufficient bases for recognizing the essential equality of man and woman from the point of view of their humanity. From the very beginning, both are persons, unlike the other living beings in the world about them. *The woman is another 'I' in a common humanity.*" By these repeated statements about women and men as human beings, as persons, as sharing a common humanity, Pope John Paul II has defended the **first premise** of what I call an "integral gender complementarity," namely the fundamental equality of dignity and worth of the two complement beings.

The **second premise** for integral gender complementarity is the identification of the significant differentiation of woman and man. The **third premise** for integral gender complementarity is the synergetic effects of their union in interpersonal relation. In section #7 the remaining two premises are clearly stated. Consider the following passage:

To be human means to be called to interpersonal communion. The text of Genesis 2: 18-25 shows that marriage is the first and, in a sense, the fundamental dimension of this call. But it is not the only one. The whole of human history unfolds within the context of this call. In this history, on the basis of the principle of mutually being "for" the other, in interpersonal "communion," there develops within humanity itself, in accordance with God's will, the integration of *what is "masculine" and what is "feminine."*

Here we discover the introduction of the significant differentiation between what is masculine and what is feminine, at the same time as we see a "call" to interpersonal communion. Further, marriage is the first and most fundamental dimension of this call, but not the only dimension. The Pope has not yet specified the essential characteristics that distinguish the masculine from feminine, but he has introduced them as significant at the same time as he states that

interpersonal communion is called for in persons who are associated with what is masculine and what is feminine.

Next, John Paul II describes how this interpersonal communion is analogous to the communion among the Divine Persons in the Holy Trinity: “This ‘unity of the two,’ which is a sign of interpersonal communion, shows that the creation of man is also marked by a certain **likeness** to the divine communion (*‘communio’*). This **likeness** is a quality of the personal being of both man and woman, and is also a call and a task”(#7). John Paul II appears to be making a distinction between the **image** of God which is found in each individual man and woman, created with an intellect and will, and the **likeness** of God which is more clearly seen in a communion of human persons called to become a living sign of the *communio* among Divine Persons. The word “*communio*” was developed during the Second Vatican Council, especially in the documents *Lumen Gentium* and *Gaudium et spes*. Karol Wojtyla, when Cardinal of Krakow, described it this way in his 1972 text, later translated into English as *Sources of Renewal: On the Implementation of the Second Vatican Council*, “Based on this law [the new commandment of Christ to love others as Christ loved us], the catholicity of the Church manifests and explains itself through *communio*, that is to say community and social unity after the **likeness** of the community of persons which, as *Gaudium et Spes* (#24) tells us, can only be fully realized in ‘sincere self-giving.’”<sup>11</sup>

In *Mulieris Dignitatem* #7, John Paul II directly applies this call to communion to woman and man in marriage:

The fact that man “created as man and woman” is the image of God means not only that each of them individually is like God, as a rational and free being. It also means that man and woman, created as a “unity of the two” in their common humanity, are called to live

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<sup>11</sup> Karol Wojtyla, *Sources of Renewal: On the Implementation of the Second Vatican Council* (New York: Collins, 1979), 135. Notice the use of the word ‘likeness’ in this context.

in a communion of love, and in this way to mirror in the world the communion of love that is in God, through which the Three Persons love each other in the intimate mystery of the one divine life.

Then, directly following the description of this likeness in the way a married couple is called to be a sign or mirror of the Divine communion, the late Holy Father immediately adds a corrective to false ways that this analogy has been understood. The key to his critique is to understand the Divine *communio* as the **prime communion**, completely spiritual in its essential inter-Personal relations, and the human *communio* as **derived** in its mixed spiritual/material relations. A root of error resides in those who consider the human *communio* as prime, and try to project this model into the Divine.

Instead, we must understand the God, the Father, eternally begetting the Son, the eternal Word, as a total **spiritual** generating. There is nothing material in this “absolute model of all ‘generation’”(8). John Paul II summarizes it this way: “in itself this ‘generating’ has neither ‘masculine’ nor ‘feminine’ qualities. It is by nature totally divine. It is spiritual in the most perfect way, since ‘God is spirit’ (Jn 4:24) and possesses no property typical of the body, neither ‘feminine’ nor ‘masculine.’ Thus even ‘fatherhood’ in God is completely divine and free of the ‘masculine’ bodily characteristics proper to human fatherhood”(8). John Paul II summarizes this difference by saying that the **likeness** between human generation and Divine generation is less than the “**non-likeness**.” Therefore, the analogy between human and divine generation is very limited. One **cannot** draw a strict likeness between an individual man and God, the Father, or a strict likeness between an individual woman and any particular member of the Divine communion of Persons. The likeness can only be drawn between **the Divine Communion of**

**Love (*communio*) among the Divine Persons and the human communion of love (*communio*)**

among a husband and wife. These communions are synergetic or generating:

Thus every element of human generation which is proper to man, and every element which is proper to woman, namely human “fatherhood” and “motherhood,” bears within itself a likeness to, or analogy with the divine “generating” and with that “fatherhood” which in God is “totally different”— that is, completely spiritual and divine in essence; whereas in the human order, generation is proper to the “unity of the two: both are “parents,” the man and the woman alike (#8).

Another clarification that the late Holy Father made about attributing fatherhood or motherhood to God, drawing upon examples from Scripture or human experience, is that one can say that God acts like a father or like a mother, **in relation to** His created world. Here the analogy, in regard to what is called ‘the divine economy,’ is properly expressed as drawn from the human experience of fathers and mothers, while it is not attributed to God in regard to the inner dynamics of love among the Divine Persons themselves. To give an example to demonstrate this difference: it is **not** correct to begin the Lord’s prayer with the words “Our Mother, who are in Heaven” because this is Jesus’s prayer as the Second Divine Person to His Father, the First Divine Person; and He adopts us by Baptism into that relation, so that His Father becomes Our Father. However, it is appropriate to pray in gratitude with St. Anselm and Julian of Norwich to Jesus Christ, who like a mother, died to give birth to us and who nourishes us through the Eucharist.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> See St. Anselm, “Prayer to St. Paul,” in *The Prayers and Meditations of St. Anselm* (New York: Penguin Books, 1972) and Bl. Julian of Norwich (1342-c. 1420) in Sr. Prudence Allen, RSM, *The Concept of Woman: The Early Humanist Reformation (1250-1500)*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 398-428.

## V. The rupture within a person and among persons through sin (#9-10).

In this next section of *Mulieris Dignitatem* Pope John Paul began to elaborate in more detail some specific differences between women and men as a consequence of original sin. While in general all human beings are affected by the disorder of the passions, the dulling of intellect, and weakening of will, the late Pope suggests that the text of Genesis offers a clue to some gender-differentiated inheritances of original sin. In an early text, *Love and Responsibility*, written in 1960 while he was still Cardinal of Krakow, we can see a similar pattern of discussion. Namely, Karol Wojtyla suggested that women tend to use a man more out of sentimentality while men tend to use a woman out of sensuality.<sup>13</sup> He argued in this text that marriage provided the opportunity to transform the raw data of sentimentality or sensuality into mature spousal love.

In *Mulieris Dignitatem*, John Paul II focused more on the roots in *Genesis* for the systematic characteristics of the sin condition in the modern world, especially as they impact on women.

...[W]hen we read in the biblical description the words addressed to the woman: “*Your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you*” (Gen 3:16), we discover a break and a constant threat precisely in regard to this “unity of the two” which corresponds to the dignity of the image and likeness of God in both of them. But this threat is more serious for the woman, since domination takes the place of “being a sincere gift” and therefore living “for” the other: “he shall rule over you.” This “domination” indicates the disturbance and *loss of the stability* of that *fundamental equality* which the man and the woman possess in the “unity of the two”: and this is especially to the disadvantage of the women, whereas only the equality resulting from their dignity as persons can give to their mutual relationship the character of an authentic “*communio personarum*.” (#10)

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<sup>13</sup> Karol Wojtyla, *Love and Responsibility* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1981), 109-114. In his words, “It is pretty generally recognized that woman is ‘by nature’ more sentimental, and man more sensual.”, here 111.

The woman must work to overcome her tendency to possess those she loves, her inheritance from original sin captured in the phrase “your desire shall be for your husband.” As St. Edith Stein observed in her *Essays on Women*, this tendency in a woman, to want to possess those she loves, can extend to her children as well.<sup>14</sup> The man also has to work to overcome his specific inheritance of original sin. In John Paul II’s words from *Mulieris Dignitatem* (#10): “The matrimonial union requires respect for and a perfecting of the true personal subjectivity of both of them. *The woman cannot become the “object” of “domination” and male “possession.”* But the words of the biblical text directly concern original sin and its lasting consequences in man and woman”(#10).

John Paul II points out another challenge for women when attempting to work through the consequences of men’s tendencies to dominate: “Consequently, even the rightful opposition of women to what is expressed in the biblical words, “He shall rule over you” (Gen 3:16) must not under any condition lead to the ‘masculinization’ of women. ‘In the name of liberation from male ‘domination,’ women must not appropriate to themselves male characteristics contrary to their own feminine ‘originality’”(#10).

We have here an indication of two further directions that John Paul II will develop in his famous paragraph #99 of the 1995 Encyclical *On the Gospel of Life*. He begins with the following:

In transforming culture so that it supports life, *women* occupy a place, in thought and action, which is unique and decisive. It depends on them to promote a ‘new feminism’ which rejects the temptation of imitating models of ‘male domination,’ in order to acknowledge and affirm the true genius of women in every aspect of the life of society, and overcome all discrimination, violence, and exploitation.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Edith Stein, *Essays on Women* (Washington DC: ICS Publications, 1987), 86-89 and 254-55.

<sup>15</sup> John Paul II, Encyclical *Evangelium Vitae* (On the Gospel of Life) (1995), #99.

The Pope was attempting to protect the genuine uniqueness of woman's identity (what he calls her "own feminine 'originality'"). He warns her of the danger of assuming a particular characteristic of man's identity, namely the tendency towards domination of another person. Following this line of thought, Mary Ann Glendon, in her essay on "What Happened at Beijing" addressed the tendency of first world women who sought to impose their positions about women's reproduction on third world women in a kind of new colonialism.<sup>16</sup>

At the same time, as these new directions are opened up for our reflection, John Paul II specified that both recognizing specified inheritances of original sin and acting to purify them is part of our universal call to holiness: "The inheritance of sin suggested by the words of the Bible—"Your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you"— *can be conquered* only by following this path. The overcome of this evil inheritance is, generation after generation, the task of every human being, whether woman or man."<sup>17</sup>

## **VI. Encountering Jesus Christ enables this rupture to be overcome (#11-16).**

In Section #11, John Paul II states the main principle: "In Christ the mutual opposition between man and woman—which is the inheritance of original sin—is essentially overcome." He further amplifies this fundamental principle: "These words concern that original 'unity of the two' which is linked with the creation of the human being as male and female, made in the image and likeness of God, and based on the model of that most perfect communion of Persons which is God himself."

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<sup>16</sup> Mary Ann Glendon, "What Happened at Beijing," in *Traditions in Turmoil* (Ann Arbor, Mi.: Sapientia Press, 2006), 105-13.

<sup>17</sup> The text continues directly focusing on man: "For whenever man is responsible for offending a woman's personal dignity and vocation, he acts contrary to his own personal dignity and his own vocation.", #10.

Jesus Christ overcomes the inheritance of original sin, through becoming man with the cooperation of Mary. In the late Pope's words: "At the beginning of the New Covenant, there is a woman: the Virgin of Nazareth." That is why he adds the further reflection that "Mary is 'the new beginning' of the dignity and vocation of women, or each and every woman; and further that "In Mary, Eve discovers the nature of the true dignity of woman, of feminine humanity. This discovery must continually reach the heart of every woman and shape her vocation and her life" (#11).

Then, after stating these principles about the recovery of sin and fulfilling of one's vocation as a woman, the four sections of the Apostolic Letter offers example after example of how Jesus Christ, when he walked upon the earth, revealed to each woman he met who she was and who she was called to be. He did this by first entering "into the concrete and historical situation of women, a situation which is weighed down by the inheritance of sin" such as in his encounter with the woman accused of adultery and the men who were about to stone her.(#14). In his encounter with her, and by his words, he awakens in the woman and all the men present a consciousness of their own sin; then, looking towards the future, he tells them not to sin again. John Paul II brings the story of this encounter up-to-date when he adds: "A woman is left alone, exposed to public opinion with 'her sin,' while behind 'her' sin there lurks a man—a sinner, guilty 'of the other's sin,' indeed equally responsible for it. And yet his sin escapes notice, it is passed over in silence..."(#14). Jesus contrasts this attitude of rejection with the original call to give oneself to the other: "The man was also entrusted by the Creator to the woman—they were entrusted to each other as persons made in the image and likeness of God."(#14).



After this first phase of encounter with Jesus Christ, and the self-discovery of one's own sinfulness in relation to those persons who God has entrusted to them, John Paul II describes the effect on women of this encounter:

*Christ's way of acting, the Gospel of his words and deeds is a consistent protest against whatever offends the dignity of women. Consequently, the women who are close to Christ discover themselves in the truth which he 'teaches' and 'does,' even when this truth concerns their 'sinfulness.' They feel 'liberated' by this truth, restored to themselves: they feel loved with 'eternal love' with a love which finds direct expression in Christ himself. In Christ's sphere of action their position is transformed. (#15)*

The Samaritan woman at the well, after her lengthy discussion with Jesus about her life, runs to tell those who live in the village to come and meet him and see for themselves. Following a dialogue with Martha about the meaning of his resurrection, "a conversation [which, according to John Paul II], is one of the most important in the Gospel," Jesus raises Lazarus from the dead. (#15).

In many other encounters recaptured in *Mulieris Dignitatem*, Jesus defended women who were criticized or devalued by the men around them, referring directly to such painful situations of women as being an unwed mother, widow, or abandoned mother of children. In later documents, leading up to the United Nations Conference on Women held in Beijing, further ways women were harmed by individual sin and social sin structures were elaborated on by John Paul II. In documents like the 1995 *Letter to Women, Evangelium Vitae*, and Holy See's *Position Paper*, and *Welcome to Gertrude Mongella*,<sup>18</sup> they included discrimination against women who chose to be wives and mothers, discrimination against girls in education, violence against women especially in the underground trade and enslavement of women, and the exploitation of women's

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<sup>18</sup> For all of these sources see, Pope John Paul II, *The Genius of Women* (Washington DC: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 1997).

bodies.<sup>19</sup> Tragically, a new form of violence against females which has been done by women themselves has recently been well documented (2007) by demographic experts as “The Global War against Baby Girls” due to “the fateful collision between overweening son preference, the use of rapidly spreading prenatal sex determination technology for gender-based abortion, and the low or dramatically declining fertility levels....”<sup>20</sup>

Returning again to our study of *Mulieris Dignitatem*, we see that after encountering oneself in relation to Jesus Christ, who reveals a to a person who he or she really is, and after seeing the liberating effect that the encounter with Jesus Christ had on several women in the Gospel, He then sends some of these women forward in her vocation to serve in a specified way. To Mary Magdelene, who was “the first to meet the Risen Christ,” he said” go to my brethren and say to them, I am ascending to my Father and to your Father, to my God and your God.” (#16). Then John Paul II observed: “Hence she came to be called: “the apostle of the Apostles.” (#16).

Filling in some of the dynamics of this vocation, John Paul II adds the following reflection: “Every vocation has a profoundly personal and prophetic meaning. In ‘vocation’ understood this way, what is personally feminine reaches a new dimension: the dimension of the ‘mighty works of God,’ of which the woman becomes the living subject and an irreplaceable witness.”(16). With this orientation to vocation in general, the next four sections of the Apostolic Letter begins to open up the internal structure of women’s specific vocations in the Church.

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<sup>19</sup> For a discussion of the similarities and differences of John Paul II’s identification of discrimination, violence, and exploitation of women with traditional feminism, see Sr. Prudence Allen, “Philosophy of Relation in John Paul II’s New Feminism,” in *Women in Christ: Toward a New Feminism*, ed. Michele M. Schumacher (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004).

<sup>20</sup> See Nicholas Eberstadt, “The Global War against Baby Girls: An Update,” in Kenneth D. Whitehead, ed., *The Church, Marriage, and the Family* (South Bend, Indiana: St. Augustine’s Press, 2007), chapter 20, 341-62.

## **VII. Paradigm dimensions of women's vocations in the Church (#17-22)**

Pope John Paul II develops the principle that the two paradigm vocations for women involve marriage and motherhood, in complementary ways. Sacramental marriage and biological motherhood, “brings about—on the woman’s part—a special ‘gift of self,’ as an expression of that spousal love whereby the two are united to each other so closely that they become ‘one flesh’” (#18). In complement to this kind of marriage, consecrated women, “give themselves to the divine Spouse, and this personal gift tends to union, which is properly spiritual in character. Through the Holy Spirit’s action a woman becomes ‘one spirit’ with Christ the Spouse”(#20).

At the same time as he differentiates these two complementary bonds of marriage, using what appears to be a material criteria and a spiritual criteria, the late Pope also insisted that a woman’s motherhood in sacramental marriage is spiritual as well as physical. His argument in defense of this point bears repeating. Even though a woman’s psycho-physical structure is naturally oriented towards motherhood, a restricted bio-physiological interpretation of women and of motherhood would be a restricted understanding of her identity. “Motherhood is linked to the personal structure of the woman and to the personal dimension of the gift” of self” (#18).

In a similar way, John Paul II points out that the spiritual marriage of the consecrated woman often manifest itself in various material situations. In his words, “motherhood ‘according to the Spirit’... can express itself in concern for people, especially the most needy: the sick, the handicapped, the abandoned, orphans, the elderly, children, young people, the imprisoned and, in general, people on the margins of society”(#21).

He identifies a key part of the *ethos* of all women as they live spousal love, namely that it “always involves a special readiness to be poured out for the sake of those who come within one’s range of activity”(21). When we ask where John Paul II finds the root of this characteristic of women, we are led to his perceptive views about how our body predisposes us, but does not biologically determine us, towards conception, pregnancy, and giving birth. While in *Mulieris Dignitatem*, he simply mentions this root of woman’s disposition to be poured out for the sake of those who come within our range of activity, in *Love and Responsibility*, a book he wrote as Karol Wojtyla, this root is made a little more precise. Namely, he suggests that because each woman usually from the time of her puberty until her menopause ovulates, her body disposes her to receive new life these many times, even if she never gets pregnant. This gift of repeated ovulations differentiates her from a man. Now, of course a woman, with free will, can choose to suppress this gift, and thus cut herself off from this disposition through some forms of artificial contraception. If she becomes conscious of her time of ovulation, through study of one of the many forms of natural family planning, she can also use this knowledge to help her conceive a child.

In *Mulieris Dignitatem*, John Paul II observes further that when a woman does become pregnant, and if she

... accepts and loves as a person the child she is carrying in her womb, [t]his unique contact with the new human being developing within her gives rise to an attitude towards human beings—not only towards her own child, but every human being—which profoundly marks the woman’s personality. It is commonly thought that *women* are more capable than men of paying attention to *another person*, and that motherhood develops this predisposition even more. The man—even with all his sharing in parenthood—always remains “outside” the process of pregnancy and the baby’s birth; in many ways he has to *learn* his own “fatherhood” from the mother. (#18)

This well-known, and often controversial passage, lays the foundation for what will become the new impetus for Pope John Paul II's genius of women, namely her way of paying attention to the whole person in her sphere of activity, in all circumstances.

Before we discuss in greater depth what it meant by the genius of women, two further aspects of John Paul II's description of the two paradigm vocations of women needs to be addressed. What about the single woman who is not married? And what about a consecrated man? It is important to keep in mind that the Second Vatican Council in *Lumen Gentium* specifically stated the principle that is now summarized as "the universal call to holiness." This means that every baptized person, man or woman, is called to become a saint, regardless of whether they are married, consecrated, or single. At the same time, Pope John Paul II clarifies that there is a difference between path of spiritual marriage and of remaining single: "This cannot be compared to remaining simply unmarried or single, because virginity is not restricted to a mere 'no,' but contains a profound 'yes' in the spousal order: the gift of self for love in a total and undivided manner" (#20). He views the consecrated woman as the analogous paradigm for a consecrated man as well: "One cannot correctly understand...a woman's consecration in virginity—without referring to spousal love. It is through this kind of love that a person becomes a gift for the other. Moreover, a man's consecration in priestly celibacy or in the religious state is to be understood analogously" (#20).

#### **VIII. New kinds of complementarity through spousal bonds (#23-26)**

At this point in *Mulieris Dignitatem*, the late Holy Father opens up a radically new dimension of sacramental marriage with great implications for the nature and dignity of women.

For many generations before this, a woman's subordination to her husband was often described as her punishment because of Eve's sin, namely, that because woman misused her free will in the garden of Eden, God placed her under the authority of a man, her husband. We already considered how a man and a woman are called to "mutual self-giving [which] is not distorted either by the desire of the man to become 'master' of his wife ('he shall rule over you') or by the woman remaining closed within her own instincts ('your desire shall be for your husband' (Gen 3:16)" (#18).

Now in section #24, Pope John Paul introduces what he calls "The Gospel 'Innovation,' namely, that in marriage there is to be "a new way: as a mutual subjection out of reverence for Christ"(#24). He differentiates between the relation of husband and wife and the relation of Christ and the Church: "whereas in the relationship between Christ and the Church the subjection is only on the part of the Church, in the relationship between husband and wife the 'subjection' is not one-sided but mutual;" and he adds: "In relation to the 'old' this is evidently something 'new': it is an innovation of the Gospel" (#24).

Just to be sure that the reader understands how significant this innovation of the Gospel is, Pope John Paul repeats it two more times, each time increasing its urgency. First,

The "innovation" of Christ is a fact: it constitutes the unambiguous content of the evangelical message and is the result of the Redemption. However, the awareness that in marriage there is mutual "subjection of the spouses out of reverence for Christ," and not just that of the wife to the husband, must gradually establish itself in the hearts, consciences, behavior and customs. It is a call which from that time onwards does not cease to challenge succeeding generations; it is a call which people have to accept ever anew(#24).

Second, commenting earlier on why this innovation is so important for a woman's nature and dignity, the Holy Father remarked: "In this love there is a fundamental *affirmation of the woman*

*as a person*. This affirmation makes it possible for the female personality to develop fully and be enriched”(#24). Before this innovation women were often thought of by philosophers and theologians to be subject to men because of a weakness of their nature. But John Paul II sets all those previous claims to rest with his definitive view: “But *the challenge presented by the “ethos” of the Redemption* is clear and definitive. All the reasons in favor of the “subjection” of woman to man in marriage must be understood in the sense of a “mutual subjection” of both “out of reverence for Christ.” (#24)

The spousal bond of husband and wife becomes a living sign for other vocations in the Church. As a living sign of the love between the Bridegroom and Bride it communicates to everyone the love that God revealed through Hosea, of God’s faithful love for his people Israel, and of the love of the Son Jesus Christ, the Bridegroom, for his Bride, the Church. Noting that while the term ‘Bride’ in this context has always been a collective term including men, women, and children, the term ‘Bridegroom’ represents an individual Divine Person. In his words: “In the Church every human being- male and female- is the ‘Bride’ in that he or she accepts the gift of the love of Christ the Redeemer, and seeks to respond to it with the gift of his or her own person” (#25 and #27).

The prime living sign of this response of the collective bride is a consecrated woman virgin, and then, by analogy is extended to religious women and men in general. In a similar way, the Ordained Priest is a living sign of the Bridegroom, and in #26 the Eucharist is described as: “The Sacrament of the Bridegroom and of the Bride, [which] makes present and realizes anew in a sacramental manner the redemptive act of Christ...”. Consequently, John Paul II, in *Mulieris Dignitatem* concludes that “the redemptive act of Christ the Bridegroom towards the Church the

Bride ... is clear and unambiguous when the sacramental ministry of the Eucharist, in which the priest acts ‘in persona Christi,’ is performed by a man”(#26).

To summarize, the spousal dimension of vocations to sacramental marriage, consecrated and priesthood, has been revealed through faith to us, as living signs of the spousal dimension of reality. Our complement vocations serve as living signs to one another of different aspects of this reality. Thus, the married couple together act as a living sign of the love between God and His People, between Christ and the Church; the consecrated woman as a living sign of the response of human love to Divine Love; and the priest as the living sign of the Bridegroom, Jesus Christ, who loves first with His saving love.<sup>21</sup>

#### **IX. Mandate to release each woman’s genius in the face of evil for the good of others (#27-31)**

The final point that we will consider with respect to the nature and dignity of woman is Pope John Paul’s innovative discussion of what he introduces as “that ‘genius’ which belongs to woman, and which can ensure sensitivity for human beings in every circumstance: because they are human!— and because ‘the greatest of these is love’ (cf. 1 Cor 13:13)” (#30). In #31, he refers again to these qualities as signs of “the feminine genius”; and he uses the word ‘feminine’ to apply uniquely to describe a woman’s way of acting in the world. Later, in John Paul II’s 1995 *Letter to Woman*, in preparing for the United Nations Conference on Women, he elaborates more on the meaning of genius in woman:

... the Church has many reasons for hoping that the forthcoming United Nations Conference in Beijing *will bring out the full truth about women*. Necessary emphasis should be placed on the “genius of women,” not only by considering great and famous

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<sup>21</sup> For a more detailed development of these complement vocations to marriage see Sr. Prudence Allen, RSM, “Catholic Marriage and Feminism,” in Kenneth D. Whitehead, *The Church, Marriage, and the Family*, 95-144.



women of the past or present, but also those *ordinary* women who reveal the gift of their womanhood by placing themselves at the service of others in their everyday lives. For in giving themselves to others each day women fulfill their deepest vocation. Perhaps more than men, women acknowledge the person, because they see persons with their hearts. They see them independently of various ideological or political systems. They see others in their greatness and limitations; they try to go out to them and help them.<sup>22</sup>

Certain questions rise in our minds when we discover this articulation of a unique approach to the feminine genius or to woman's genius: What about the genius of man? And does every woman automatically have this genius? are two examples of these kinds of questions. An answer to the first question about man has yet to be articulated by the Church, but some hints may be found in different documents about St. Joseph, *On Human Work*, and so on. The second question about every woman can also be answered by simply looking around. Namely, it is not the case that every woman pays attention to the human person in her sphere of activity, and it is also the case that some men seem to do this very well, like John Paul II, for example. So what is he saying about the female root of a woman's genius, and what is it exactly?

In section #30 of *Mulieris Dignitatem*, John Paul II identifies what seems to be an essential characteristic of the genius of a woman. She receives the human being that is entrusted to her and she fosters the growth of that human being, for whom she is responsible. John Paul II says it this way: "The moral and spiritual strength of a woman is joined to her awareness that God entrusts the human being to her in a special way;" and "A woman is strong because of her awareness of this entrusting, strong because of the fact that God 'entrusts the human being to her,' always and in every way, even in the situations of social discrimination in which she may find herself." This kind of entrusting of a human being could be the obvious discovery of being pregnant, awareness of her responsibility towards her own children, or it could be toward the students entrusted to her if she is a teacher, or the people in her sphere of responsibility in an

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<sup>22</sup> John Paul II, *Letter to Women*, in *The Genius of Women*, #12.

office if she is in business; or the patients entrusted to her if she is in a medical occupation, and so on. In those circumstances, the particular way a woman chooses to act reveals whether she has discovered her own genius or not. However, we know that some women act against this genius when they have an abortion or if they become hardened and seem to act in a very different way. This is because, as a human person, we have free will and intellect and can sadly choose to act against our nature and dignity.

John Paul II is realistic when he describes the woman in Revelation 12:4 as representing the cosmic scale of our identity as women. She is standing before “the Evil one, the ‘father of lies’... the ‘ancient serpent’ [who] wishes to devour ‘the child’” (#30). He concludes that it is the struggle of each and every woman to decide whether she will say ‘yes’ or ‘no’ to God and His eternal plan for her. He concludes in #31 by acknowledging that through the action of the Holy Spirit in the world, in this ‘meditating on the biblical mystery of the ‘woman,’ the Church prays that in this mystery all women may discover themselves and their ‘supreme vocation.’

Returning to the famous section #99 in the encyclical *On the Gospel of Life*, we find John Paul II pleading with women to develop their genius for the good of society. Indeed, he argues that it is crucial for culture that women do the necessary work in this area of their vocation:

Women first learn and then teach others that human relations are authentic if they are open to accepting the other person: a person who is recognized and loved because of the dignity which comes from being a person and not from other considerations, such as usefulness, strength, intelligence, beauty, or health. This is the fundamental contribution which the Church and humanity expect from women. And it is the indispensable prerequisite for an authentic cultural change.

## **X: Conclusion: the practical example of ENDOW**

How can women come to discover this great gift of their nature, their dignity, and vocation? How can they come to know what the Church has been teaching since 1988 about the call to discover and develop a unique feminine genius for the good of the Church and the world?

Some recent developments among lay women's organizations have begun to address this question. The organization with which I am most familiar is called ENDOW, an acronym for Educating on the Nature and Dignity of Women according to the new feminism of John Paul II. It began in Denver about four years ago and is now holding classes in dioceses always with the written permission of the local ordinary. It is aimed at "the woman in the pew" meaning, any woman who wants to learn what the Catholic Church actually teaches about women's nature, dignity, and vocation. ENDOW provides study guides and facilitator training to particular documents such as John Paul II's *Letter to Women*, Apostolic Letter on the *Dignity and Vocation of Women*, *Mother of the Redeemer*, as well as on St. Thomas on the human passions and on the virtues, and another one written by four authors on *Woman's Dignity at Different Times of Life*. Other study guides are in process on St. Edith Stein, St. Teresa of Avila, on John Paul II's *Gospel of Suffering*, on Pope Benedict's *Deus Caritas Est*, on Augustine's *Confessions*, always with a focus on how they particularly relate their subject to woman's dignity and vocation. Study guides for highschool and junior high students, and translations into Spanish are also being piloted.

In just four years, ENDOW classes are being held in twenty-four states, thirty-five different dioceses, and are about to begin in two new countries, Canada and Italy. The study groups are open to women from all spiritualities recognized by the Church: and they are held in parishes, in homes, on university campuses, and in pastoral centers. If you are interested in

finding out how you could begin an Endow study group in Madison, you could visit the website at [endowonline.com](http://endowonline.com) to get information about the process, ask your Bishop for permission, and start when you are ready.

God bless you as you move forward in your own way and time of education.